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Ad Knotter e.a. (eds.), *Limburg. Een geschiedenis I: tot 1500; Limburg. Een geschiedenis II: 1500-1800; Limburg. Een geschiedenis III: vanaf 1800* (Maastricht: Koninklijk Limburgs Geschied- en Oudheidkundig Genootschap, 2015, 595 pp. (I), 432 pp. (II), 527 pp. (III), ISBN 978 90 819602 2 9).

A cursory look at a map of the Netherlands will show a narrow piece of land in the south-eastern part of the country, squeezed in between Belgium and Germany – the Dutch province of Limburg. Its position alone suggests a fascinating history. This is emphasised by the fact that this province is an amalgamation of a dozen territories resulting from the 1815 Vienna conferences, but as early as 1064 a ‘Comes Udo de Lemborc’, Count Udo of Limburg, held authority in some of these areas in name of Henry IV, the Holy Roman Emperor and King of Germany. This is an extremely interesting region at the crossroads of European history. The emergence and development of this province has now been documented and discussed in three volumes, some 1.500 pages, richly illustrated with maps, graphs, reproductions and photographs.

45 specialists were invited to write chapters on a particular aspect of the history of the territory that now forms this Dutch province. Among these authors we find some very well-known authorities and also a number of younger scholars. The oldest was born in 1936, the youngest 47 years later. The editorial board organised a broad scope of topics, ranging from the landscape, archaeology, Romans, churches and cults, medieval and modern arts, education and manuscripts, urbanisation and urban life, crafts, guilds and trades, mining, industrial relations, village life and the green revolution, science, historical demography, migration, etc. Some of these topics have received a lot of scholarly attention in recent years, others are far less researched. Some contributions present a lot of original material, while others evaluate existing knowledge. The volumes cover a long period from Palaeolithic times to the Maastricht treaty of the late twentieth century and beyond. It is clear: the contributions to these volumes are diverse.

The Dutch province of Limburg is an artificially constructed region dating from the nineteenth century. This means it is a territory without a long history or standing identity. This is a border region, as Knotter, the first editor, states in the introduction; it is part of the Rhine-Meuse area, and it underwent a lot of territorial changes that resulted in these lands being split and combined. Throughout the ages the region was under the influence of a multitude of cultural styles and several political and economic powers. One thing that emerges from these volumes is the changeability of

regional identity. Although the phenomenon is not explicitly addressed in these books, this history of Limburg is a perfect prism to show the 'thin' and 'thick' regional identities– the institutionalised, old characteristics that were transferred over several generations, and the newly added or created qualities and traditions that replaced or transformed older identities, as a consequence of changes that followed new rulers in these territories (see Kees Terlouw, 'Rescaling Regional Identities: Communicating Thick and Thin Regional Identities', *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 9 (2009) 452-464).

The volumes have an introductory chapter, but not a concluding one. The introduction addresses the historiography regarding this province and presents an overview of earlier answers to the question how Limburg's history relates to the general Dutch history. For older generations of historians this was an important problem that needed to be solved. This book is different, as it conceptualises the pre-nineteenth century history of Limburg as the history of a territory and not necessary as Dutch. This in itself is a refreshing thought, but there is no central thesis or idea postulated to operationalise it. As a consequence, there are several approaches pursued throughout the books, a conceptual freedom that has resulted in some intriguing paradoxes and interesting new questions.

In all volumes the authors report on the diverse territorial and political configurations that provided frameworks for the rule of law, taxation and social-cultural life at different moments. The region was controlled in parts by different institutions, mostly bishops, princes, dukes and monasteries. The control over the southern territories was continuously contested. These areas were too fertile, too productive and too rich not to be disputed. Often new rulers reorganised administrative structures to ascertain a more efficient performance of authority. In the High Middle Ages and Early Modern times the region shifted from an orientation on the German Empire to the House of Valois-Burgundy and their Habsburg heirs and competitors, like the Dukes of Guelders, Gulik and the rebellious Dutch Provinces in the late sixteenth century. It resulted in warfare, urbanisation and new forms of governance. The chapters on this period show the striking contrast between the continuity in economic, social and cultural development, and the dramatic political and institutional changes. The new borders did not stop people to move around freely: until the middle of the nineteenth century and even later people sought their incomes across borders. It would be interesting to further examine this relative autonomous development of the society at one hand and the state-formation process at the other.

Several authors discuss the implications of the territorial diversity for the social, cultural and religious developments. There is continuity in cross-border contacts and relations between individuals, lay and clerical organisations from the moment these borders were created. Compared to this, the influence of transnational developments like the Counter-Reformation in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the grass-root devotionalisation

of the nineteenth century and rising social tensions in the mining regions during the industrialisation was more temporary. These transnational developments were introduced and mediated by local or regional elites that saw new chances. They acted as transmitters of new ideas, styles, and products. The result was a hierarchical and religious frontier society, joining closely the social and cultural domains in Limburg with developments in nearby Germany and Belgium. In this climate Catholicism dominated most of the cultural and scientific activities from the nineteenth century onwards. Catholicism institutionalised in a social and cultural homogeneous society, which on the Dutch level served as part of the Catholic pillar. However, as integration in the Netherlands continued, this uniformity and dominance became challenged and effectively 'pillarised' after World War II. With this soft segmentation of society in Limburg, the province was, also in a social and cultural sense, a full part of the Netherlands.

These volumes situate the history of the Dutch province of Limburg in a spatial continuum. Its development is presented not so much as being connected with the general Dutch history; on the contrary, it seems much more part of the history of Northwestern Europe. The diversity in the province's territorial heritage had a long-lasting influence. In the nineteenth century the Belgian and German borders slowly obtained more social and cultural significance, simultaneously the influence of Dutch culture rose with newspapers, general elections, radio, television and modernisation. This economic and cultural unification process seemed to reach its climax in the middle of the twentieth century, just before the European integration and the globalisation started its influence. How this new era affected and will affect Limburg and its 'thick' and 'thin' regional identities is not touched upon in these volumes, but could be an appropriate starting point for a new project. That such a project will start within a few years is very likely. Regional history in Limburg is flourishing.

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